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ABSTRACT

New Beginning is a transitional program for limited-English-proficient (LEP) secondary school students in Dade County, Florida whose prior school experience was interrupted or limited. The program currently serves 102 students in four schools. Most participants are Hispanic or Haitian. Students are selected by district-wide criteria and grouped in self-contained classes. Program aims are: (1) to develop rapid acquisition of English skills, literacy, and academic skills needed to profit from English-as-a-Second-Language and bilingual curriculum content programs, as well as a more positive self-image; and (2) to reduce failure and dropout rates. Although the schools all follow specific guidelines, program implementation varies. All participants enrolled shortly after arrival in the United States. The program's attendance rate has been generally high. Achievement data for the first year is inconclusive concerning program success. Staff perceive the program as valuable, student response has been positive, and the program appears to have been beneficial to students to date. Analysis of program results is continuing, and will include student interviews. (MSE)

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A New Beginning for LEP Students?

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A New Beginning for LEP Students?

New Beginning is a special transitional program for limited English proficient (LEP) students in secondary schools in Dade County, Miami, Florida. The program was designed to address the needs of LEP students with interrupted or limited prior school experience. It was first piloted in the 1988-89 school year when it served 152 students in three schools; currently, it serves 102 students in four schools. Most of the students being served are Hispanic or Haitian, reflecting the ethnic composition of the foreign students in the district.

Enrollment figures, for the 1988-89 and the 1989-90 school year LEP population, show that there were over 34,000 LEP students in the district; and over 7,400 in secondary schools each year. Dade County's current secondary ESOL and Bilingual Curriculum Content (BCC) programs are based on the assumption that LEP students possess literacy and academic skills in their native language which they can transfer to the new language, English. For some LEP students this assumption represents a double handicap because the students not only lack English proficiency, but they also lack literacy and academic skills; and these two handicaps are then further compounded by high school graduation requirements.

In order to ameliorate the problem, selected students (following district-wide criteria) were chosen for program participation and grouped in homogeneous self-contained classes. The program aimed to develop : (1) rapid acquisition of English skills, (2) the necessary literacy and academic skills to enable students to fully profit from secondary ESOL and BCC-type courses, (3) a way to impact the high failure and dropout rate among students with this type of problem, and (4) a more positive self-image. The content of the courses and the methodology employed were very basic; emphasizing continuous progress and achievement, and thus meeting the individual needs of the students.

During the 1988-89 school year, in the three schools where the program was implemented, program documents were reviewed, and observations and interviews were conducted. Some class schedules were also gathered from the district's student file system to verify course assignments. In addition, student rosters were distributed to obtain background information and scores on language proficiency tests. These procedures were slightly modified for the 1989-90 school year.

The characteristics of the program were also delineated on the basis of the feedback provided during the 1988-89 school year. In general, New Beginning differs from the regular ESOL transitional program in that it offers three hours of consecutive ESOL instruction (as compared to the regular two hours) and two hours of consecutive BCC-math instruction (as compared to the regular hour). In 1988-89, one of the middle schools could only offer one hour of BCC-math instruction and this school remained as part of the program. The guidelines for the 1989-90 school year were more clearly defined and monitored and only the schools which followed the guidelines were included in the program. These guidelines follow.

Guidelines for program New Beginning

1. Students have been assessed with an ESOL Placement Test.
2. Students have been assessed in the home language (reading and math).
3. Students meet the criteria of: (a) limited English proficiency, and (b) limited prior school experience.
4. Students have been homogeneously grouped for ESOL and BCC-math.
5. Students have been scheduled into three ESOL courses.
6. The three ESOL periods are consecutive and taught by the same teacher.
7. The students have been scheduled into two basic BCC-math courses.
8. The [illegible] periods are consecutive and taught by the same teacher.
9. For the other two periods, the students are enrolled in courses geared to their needs (e.g., vocational, Spanish-S).
10. The teacher(s) has (have) received ESOL training.
11. Instructional materials geared to the students special needs are being used in ESOL and BCC-math.

In general, the schools currently implementing the program follow these guidelines although variations do exist. For example, in one of the high schools, the same teacher instructs students in ESOL and BCC-math; and in the high school with the Haitian students there is also an aide in the classroom working on a part-time basis. Most teachers in New Beginning have expressed positive attitudes toward the program and its structure, agreeing that it meets a very critical need in these students.

The students involved in New Beginning are representative of the LEP students served by the district. Table 1 presents the breakdown of the participants by gender, grade, and ethnicity; for the two school years, as each year represents a different group of students.

Table 1

Students in New Beginning by gender, grade, and ethnicity

Category	1988-89		1989-90	
	Students			
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Gender				
Male	96	63	61	60
Female	56	37	41	40
Grade				
6			4	3
7	51	34	3	3
8	36	24	16	16
9	64	42	73	72
10			6	6
Ethnicity				
Black	27	18	16	16
Hispanic	125	82	86	84

Although most of the students are Hispanic, the students' backgrounds are not homogeneous, as they come from a variety of Latin American countries including Nicaragua, which is the country with the highest percentage (63%) of participants in the program this year. Most of the Black students come from Haiti and all of them attend one of the senior high schools in the program.

Additional information from both school years revealed that the students in New Beginning enrolled in the school system shortly after their arrival to the United States, usually within a month or two. This implies that although some foreign students come illegally or face hardships in following immigration procedures, they still make the effort to become part of the school system.

The absentee rate for program participants in the 1988-89 school year was also impressive, as the average number of absences for all participants was six; indicating that most students had good attendance. This figure should be viewed with caution though, as some students had not been in school for the full year, so that the actual average number of absences may be underestimated.

The range of absences also varied from 0 to 40 which may indicate that attendance could be a serious problem for some of these students. This was supported by the data from two students who had been in the country for over four years, and who had more than 30 absences each. Interviews with students with similar problems in the 1989-90 school year may reveal insights as to the causes of the problem and how to handle it.

In terms of achievement, as measured by the Dade County Secondary Placement Test (DCSPT) which is the most widely used language proficiency test in the district, the results for 1988-89 were not conclusive. Only 44 students (29%) from two of the schools (one middle school did not have any pretest scores) had both a pre- and a posttest score. Based on this small sample and recognizing this limitation, the result of the gain score analysis between the pre- and the posttest indicated a 4.5 point gain which was statistically significant (t (43) = 3.58, p = .001). This value suggests that students made improvements in achievement. The results of the 1989-90 school year will provide more information regarding the effectiveness of the program.

Interviews with teachers and administrators during the two years, have consistently shown that staff value the program and consider it to be very beneficial to the students. Teachers have stated that their students have improved tremendously since their enrollment, and that the program design had made the difference in their progress. In one of the middle schools, students were asked to write a paragraph in their native language about the program, and most of the responses were very positive. In their compositions, students emphasized their need to learn English quickly and how helpful the three hours of instruction were. The additional time in math was also appreciated, along with the teachers' knowledge of the subject matter and their personal care and support.

Achievement data from 1989-90 is only available for the beginning of the school year, as the end of the school year data will be collected in May. Nevertheless, as part of the evaluation of the 1989-90 school year (and in accordance with the guidelines of the program), all program participants were required to have scores on the DCSPT, or another language proficiency test, the Total Math Program (TMP) Placement Review for fifth grade (translated in their native language), and the State Sample Assessment Items (SSAT) for fifth grade in reading and math, in their native language. These tests were administered by the ESOL teacher in the fall.

The scores of the 102 students in the program appear in Table 2. They reflect scores on English language proficiency (DCSPT and DCOLPS), elementary math skills at the fifth grade level (TMP and SSAT Math), and elementary reading skills (SSAT reading). As can be seen, these students have very low skills, even if their native language; which supports the need for program New Beginning. These students will be administered the DCSPT or the DCOLPS in the spring to determine their progress in English proficiency. The math SSAT test will also be administered to determine their degree of improvement in math in their native language since BCC-math uses the student's native language for instruction. These test results will also serve to assess the effectiveness of the program.

Table 2

Scores of 1989-90 New Beginning students in the fall

Test	Items	n	Correct Mean	S.D.
DCSPT	100	78	25	11.88
DCOLPS	100	23	4	14.26
TMP	40	98	4	2.93
SSAT Math	165/160*	102	103	35.21
Skills	33/33	102	18	9.29
SSAT Reading	132/120	100	82	31.54
Skills	24/24	100	14	7.40

*The number of items refer to the Spanish and Haitian versions, as some items had to be eliminated from the Haitian versions. The scoring procedures were adjusted accordingly, and the number of clusters did not change.

It is interesting to note that students perform better on the DCSPT than on the DCOLPS. The DCSPT is a multiple-choice, 100 item test, which measures receptive language skills (understanding and reading), and consists of four parts: listening comprehension, listening and reading comprehension, vocabulary and language structure (blanks), and vocabulary and language structure (sentences). Because of the multiple-choice format, students could obtain a number of correct answers by guessing, which could be more prevalent at the entry level.

On the other hand, the Dade County Oral Language Proficiency Scale (DCOLPS) is a productive test administered individually which controls guessing to the minimum. This test is an oral interview and it is scored on four dimensions: understanding spoken language, using grammatical structure, pronunciation, and vocabulary. The test needs revisions, but it does seem to reflect the students' knowledge of English better at entry level.

The TMP and the SSAT in Spanish and Haitian-Creole were used solely to establish the students' academic and literacy level in their native language. The results from these tests were very informative and Table 2 shows that all students in the program failed to meet the basic fifth grade standards assessed by these tests, especially the SSAT. This is primarily the basis of the New Beginning program.

Given the low level skills that these students bring into the program, and their need to learn English in a quick and efficient manner; program New Beginning seems to be promising in meeting those needs. The posttest results and the spring data collection will provide more information regarding the students' progress and the program effectiveness.

Along with surveys and interviews with the teachers, a bilingual staff member (Spanish and Haitian-Creole) will be contracted to interview a random number of participants to determine their degree of satisfaction with the program, their attitudes toward school and learning, and their personal goals and aspirations. These data will be correlated with their test scores and other background information; such as, time in the United States and number of absences. They will also become the factors which will enter into the multiple regressions, with test scores or personal satisfaction as the variable to be explained from the gathered data.

These results will be available in the summer. Specific plans for the students in the program and the program itself have not been developed, but it is expected that as long as there is a need, the program will be available to the schools in the district. Teachers and administrators have also expressed a concern for a follow-up of these students, as many of them may not be ready to participate in the regular ESOL program.

In sum, program New Beginning is intended to meet a critical need in LEP students with interrupted or limited prior school experience by providing students with the necessary academic and personal skills to succeed in school. Other school districts with similar populations may find the program guidelines, curriculum materials, assessment instruments, and preliminary results useful. The long-term effect of this program could (in the longitudinal analysis) prove the program to be the most rapid and cost-effective way for LEP students to learn English, have a successful school experience; and thus, graduate from high school.

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